

Social Pressure, Comparison, and Emotional Well-Being

Children and teens compare themselves with other people long before they use social media, but digital platforms can make comparison constant. A child may compare appearance, friendships, popularity, possessions, grades, athletic ability, or the number of likes and comments a post receives. The important question is not whether comparison ever happens; it is what the comparison is doing to the child. Watch for patterns such as a noticeable drop in mood after scrolling, repeated comments about not being good enough, pressure to look or live a certain way, or avoiding activities because the child feels inferior. Do not assume that social media is the only cause. Ask what the child is seeing and how it feels. The U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory notes that social media can provide connection and support but also carries potential risks, and the evidence does not justify treating it as universally safe for children and adolescents.¹ The American Psychological Association’s health advisory recommends developmentally appropriate monitoring and attention to content and experiences that may affect psychological well-being.² AAP resources explain that comparing oneself with curated or edited images can contribute to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and poorer well-being for some adolescents.³ Help your child examine what is real, edited, selective, or designed to attract attention. Use questions rather than speeches: “How do you usually feel after looking at this account?” “Does this make you feel inspired, pressured, or worse about yourself?” Let the child mute, unfollow, or step away from accounts that consistently create distress. Strengthen offline sources of identity—family contribution, friendships, hobbies, competence, exercise, creativity, and responsibilities. If comparison is connected to persistent sadness, anxiety, eating changes, self-harm content, or major changes in functioning, involve a pediatrician or mental health professional.

Did You Know?

- ✓ The U.S. Surgeon General says current evidence does not allow us to conclude that social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents.¹
- ✓ APA’s adolescent social-media advisory emphasizes developmentally appropriate monitoring and attention to online experiences that may affect psychological well-being.²
- ✓ AAP resources report that comparison with curated or edited images can contribute to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and poorer well-being for some teens.³

Research Sources

- [1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. “Social Media and Youth Mental Health.” 2023.](#)
- [2. American Psychological Association. “Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence.” May 2023.](#)
- [3. American Academy of Pediatrics. “Viewing and Creating Curated Images.” Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health.](#)

Ten-Minute Social Comparison Check-In

Use this page to help your child notice how online comparison affects mood and choose one practical response without turning the conversation into a lecture.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

Platform/account: _____ Time checked: _____

1. Notice the Feeling - About 2 Minutes

Ask how the child feels before and after viewing the content.

Before: _____ After: _____

2. Name the Comparison - About 2 Minutes

Identify what the child is comparing: appearance, popularity, possessions, skills, or something else.

I was comparing: _____

3. Check What Is Real - About 2 Minutes

Look for editing, selective posting, advertising, or missing context.

What might be edited or left out: _____

4. Choose a Response - About 2 Minutes

Let the child choose one reasonable action.

☐ Keep following ☐ Mute ☐ Unfollow ☐ Take a break ☐ Talk to someone

5. Reconnect Offline - About 2 Minutes

Name one real-world activity, relationship, skill, or responsibility that supports identity and competence.

I will spend time on: _____

What Parents Can Say: "You noticed how that content affected you and made a choice."